

# Typhus Experiments, Courage and Complicity

## Richard Weikart

### H-NET BOOK REVIEW

Published by [H-German@h-net.msu.edu](mailto:H-German@h-net.msu.edu) (February, 2006)

Naomi Baumslag. *Murderous Medicine: Nazi Doctors, Human Experimentation, and Typhus* Westport: Praeger, 2005. xxix + 272 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 0-275-98312-9.

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*Murderous Medicine* examines the behaviour of German and Jewish physicians, as well as the Red Cross, during the National Socialist era, especially as they grappled with typhus. Except for some background material on the pre-Nazi period, Baumslag focuses almost exclusively on the Jewish ghettos and Nazi camps, only occasionally mentioning typhus outbreaks and treatment among Russian POWs, German soldiers and occupied populations. Despite the title, only about half the book is about Nazi doctors, since of the six chapters, one is on Jewish physicians, one is on the Red Cross, and the final chapter--which does not fit very well into this volume--is on the history of biological warfare from ancient times to the present.

Baumslag's book is an impassioned plea for her fellow physicians to remain committed to the "traditional medical ethics" of the Hippocratic Oath. By exposing the immorality and inhumanity of Nazi doctors, the courageous resistance and dedication of Jewish doctors and the cowardly behaviour of the International Red Cross, she hopes to keep alive the memory of an atrocity that we dare not repeat.

Baumslag argues that the Nazis used typhus epidemics in the ghettos and camps as a means of annihilating Jews. She points out that the Germans produced the very conditions--overcrowding, lack of sanitation, malnutrition, and so on--that allowed typhus to thrive. However, the Nazis also took measures to try to contain typhus, in part because they were afraid of contracting the disease themselves (sometimes epidemics in the camps did spread to the SS). Even though Baumslag argues convincingly that the Nazi efforts to contain typhus among Jews were ineffective and half-hearted, the fact that they tried at all seems to undermine her suggestion that typhus was a calculated mode of killing. She also shows that the Nazis often sent typhus patients to the gas chambers in a vain attempt to control the disease, which is more evidence against the idea that Nazis used typhus deliberately to kill.

However, Nazis did use typhus to kill deliberately in a different way: through medical experimentation. German physicians tried to develop typhus

vaccines for their troops, and they tested them on camp inmates. Many of these tests resulted in death for the subjects, and even those who survived were usually killed thereafter.

Ironically, some Jews (and Poles) used the Germans' fear of typhus to their advantage, posting warning signs to keep Germans away. However, on the other hand, many Jews had to hide their symptoms, because German countermeasures for typhus were usually ruthless. Nazis often killed typhus patients and those in close contact with them, such as when they burned down the Kovno Ghetto Hospital with patients, doctors, and nurses inside, killing sixty-seven.

While there is much interesting material in this book, most of it is based on secondary sources, and some of these sources do not seem all that reliable. Also, quite a few important secondary sources were not consulted, including most German-language sources. Archival sources were used, too, but not extensively. This book contains quite a few minor mistakes, most of which are probably due to the use of unreliable sources. The many misspellings of German words and names do not inspire much confidence, either.

Finally, since Baumslag expresses so much interest in medical ethics, I was disappointed in the lack of analysis on this topic. She does not examine the lives and careers of any of the Nazi doctors in sufficient depth to enlighten us about their motivations. Nor does she ever say anything about how any of these Nazi physicians viewed medical ethics. Baumslag's work is thought-provoking, but does not tell us much about Nazi physicians that we do not already know from works by Paul Weindling, Robert Proctor, Michael Kater, Michael Burleigh, Henry Friedlander, Andreas Frewer, Ernst Klee or Horst Freyhofer. Her main contribution is to depict the immoral typhus experiments of the Nazis, the courage of Jewish physicians and the silence and complicity of the Red Cross in confronting typhus in Nazi-controlled Europe during World War II.

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